DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 854 FL 024 413

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TITLE Alternative Assessment: Directed Creative Writing for Intermediate Level Students.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Literatures (19th, Youngstown, OH, March 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Class Activities; Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; *Creative Writing; Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; Language Skills; *Language Tests; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Spanish; Story Grammar; *Student Evaluation; Student Participation; Test Anxiety; Testing; Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS *Alternative Assessment

ABSTRACT

Use of a directed creative writing exercise to assess intermediate language students' skills is discussed. The technique was developed for second-year college Spanish instruction as an alternative to conventional writing tests in which anxiety or lack of motivation may inhibit performance. Differences in the nature of language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) are analyzed and common difficulties in engaging students in their use are discussed. The technique presented here is based on development of discussion skills to facilitate transition between speaking and writing, consisting of a series of exercises including in-class review of grammatical points, peer and group revision, and coding of discourse structure and grammatical errors using a code familiar to both students and teacher. Students are told they will write a short story together. Basic story structure is explained and discourse parameters reviewed very briefly. Simple visual aids are used to generate and focus discussion on story creation. The teacher then elicits ideas and story-related structures with specific questions. Brainstorming follows, and students complete the story outside class, consulting each other as desired. Resulting compositions are more substantive and have many fewer errors, and student response to the exercise has been very positive. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT: DIRECTED CREATIVE WRITING FOR INTERMEDIATE LEVEL STUDENTS

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"The purpose of the test is to measure variance in performance of various sorts", Oller (1979). Testing has become such a natural part of instruction that we would not dare to challenge its need in order to measure students' progress. Nevertheless, and despite of the progress of current, mentalist theories on teaching towards natural/communicative approaches, many of the theoretical assumptions underlying contemporary testing are based on behaviouristic views of cognitive development. (Fidalgo and von Schmidt, 1995).

If we consider the case of intermediate level foreign language courses we immediately see the case we are addressing in this paper. We have, on the one hand, a syllabus in which students are expected to participate in classroom activities as well as write somewhat lengthy compositions to successfully complete the course; on the other hand, a student body who is not willing to participate out of lack of motivation (many of them take classes just to fulfill foreign language requirements), frustration with their ability to express themselves in the foreign language, or simply fear to public exposure.

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This presentation deals with classroom techniques to promote discussion for the assessment of class participation, and explores creativity as an alternative way to conventional methods of monitoring students' language progress and performance. The

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care free, challenging nature of the exercises increases motivation, takes away the fear of public exposure, and makes learning fun. It helps students to feel safe to explore and use the language, and provides the instructor with opportunities to evaluate students' progress.

The difficulties instructors face in engaging students in speaking in a foreign language become even more acute in writing exercises. Writing, of the four language skills, is somehow understood to be the most difficult one, and it is supposed to be the last skill to develop. This common understanding is probably due to the dual nature of writing, which is, on the one hand a communicative act, and on the other, a very solitary task. The initial difficulty of communicating with a low level of competence is compounded by the lack of some of the same components that ease communication: factual exchange, immediate feedback, etc.

While we should not artificially separate the four language components, we have to be aware of the fact that both receptive skills, listening and reading, rely on language material organized and produced by the speaker or the writer. In reading, one interacts with the text and receives the information to be processed; the possible isolation of the task is broken either by interaction with the instructor or by the pre-reading activities and exercises. Listening functions very similarly: one interacts with the input provided by the speaker, and there is a whole variety of information that can include all kind of clues given by verbal and no-verbal communication.

If we, now, move onto the analysis of the productive skills, we can see that, again, there is a difference between them; while in the speaking skill one can heavily rely on the immediate feedback of the listener, in writing this is not the case. Writing is a variable,

open ended exercise in which the writer is supposed to face alone a piece of paper with a pen.

> On the other hand, because writing is a very solitary undertaking, writers must make message adjustments *alone*. When you speak, your listeners provide many kinds of feedback about whether you are communicating clearly. When you write, however, you must imagine the reader, imagine what the reader's purpose is--what his or her questions about the topic will be--, imagine the impact of your words are having, and decide, without any feedback, what changes need to be made.
> (Valdés, Dvorak and Hannum, ix)

Writing in one's own language can be intimidating enough. I dare to challenge all of you to think if there has never been a time in which, confronted with the task of writing in your native language, you did not find yourselves befuddled, hesitant, if not outright paralyzed, and wondering: What do I say? How do I say it? Where shall I start? This attitude is more understandable in students writing in a foreign language for whom the initial, and I would like to add, natural hesitation, is followed by their limitations in the target language, which turn writing into a slow, frustrating process.

Then, how can we get our students to overcome the difficulties of writing? The latest research has produced several theories of what makes a good writer, but these theories have been developed with established writers in their native language in mind. Still, they are useful to us in the sense that not only they provide us with an insight of the nature of writing, but also because they analyze and divide writing into certain specific tasks.

Most authors see writing as a binary system. Bizell (1986) distinguishes between composing and writing, a distinction in which the former refers to the process previous to the final writing: choice of, and reflection about the topic, gathering of information,

working on several drafts, revising, and the latter to the actual transcription of the previous material into a final draft. Dvorak (1986), on the other hand, distinguishes between transcription, where the focus is the form, and composition, where the focus is the effective development and communication of ideas, or in other words, the different activities that involve transferring thoughts to paper. Their proposed components are very similar: a first stage of composition followed by a second of transcription or writing of what has been composed. Composition is, then, equivalent to what most instructors who teach writing courses would recognize as the before-writing and correcting stages, while transcription is equivalent to writing the final draft.

Kroll (1990) suggests that writing in a second language becomes even more complex since, in this case, the problems of composing are compounded by difficulties with the new code. We can safely state that, at least over the last years, much attention has been paid to, and efforts have been made to resolve the difficulties students have with grammar and expression when faced with writing in the new code. We have moved away from traditional textbooks which saw grammar as the primary tool for writers, that based evaluation mainly on the accidents of discourse: spelling, punctuation, morphology, and syntax, rather than on the essence of discourse; we have devised a whole series of techniques which includes in-class revision of grammatical points, peer and group revision, and the common practice of matching mistakes with symbols from a code known to and shared by students and instructors.

It will seem that we have managed to make the transcription-writing stage more accessible to students of a second language by turning it into a more communicative process, by leaving behind the notion that it is the students' task to find and correct his/her

own mistakes. At least, this seems to be the case at the advanced and superior levels. Nevertheless, at the intermediate level, there are several steps to be taken prior to the final stage which still present serious difficulties and which have not been addressed.

There is no possible discussion about the fact that students at the intermediate level know less of the foreign language code than at later stages, and that most of the writing they do, if not all, is limited primarily as a support skill. But it also happens that, following this pattern, students are reduced to write about routine activities, an exercise that does not match with their more sophisticated cognitive and conceptual development, which has reached much higher stages. An illustration of what has just been said can be found in the ACTFL guidelines of recommended contents for writing at the intermediate level:

> Content: Everyday topics such as: Personal biographical information, activities, hobbies, preferences, daily routine, lodging, health matters, travel and transportation, school/work experiences, everyday events. (ACTFL, 1986)

All these topics refer to the students' personal experiences expressed in a linear, mechanical manner, and we, instructors, are more concerned about structure than about building up their ability to express themselves, more focused on the form, than on helping students to develop specific problem solving strategies. We are letting their level of competence limit their expression of the world, instead of allowing their expression of the world help build up their level of competence. The result of this approach is the students' obvious frustration at their incapacity to express their own meaning within the limits of their developing competence in the foreign language.

In order to analyze this issue, who better than the students themselves to explain what the real problems are when faced with writing in a foreign language? To that purpose we

created a questionnaire, asking them to tell us what, in their experience, was it that made writing in a foreign language such a difficult task at this level. This questionnaire was given to all the students, twenty one, beginning a third semester Spanish language class. All answers were read in detail before proceeding to, first design, and then test the creative writing activity designed for the purpose of bridging the gap between writing and effective communication. Of the twenty one answers, one third, seven, were selected at random and numbered from one to seven. Students were required to answer the following questions:

QUESTIONNAIRE

How do you feel about writing in Spanish?

a. I have no problem

b. My problem writing in Spanish is: (Check as many answers as you need and explain why).

- b.1. Vocabulary
- b.2. Grammar
- b.3. Lack of ideas
- b.4. Difficulty to match ideas and expression
- b.5. Working in isolation
- b.6. Other.

As we explained before, one third of the students' answers was selected at random, (the number that appears in parenthesis refers to their alphabetical position in the class roster). Their answers to these questions were as follows:

1. "I can't make my ideas flow" (20)

2. "I think in English" (9)

3. "I am sort of OK writing in Spanish. If I know what I want to write I am fine. If I just want to sit down and start writing it is difficult for me. Sometimes I do not know how to say things in Spanish" (8)

4. "I do not expect to be able to express myself really well. My creativity in another language is limited" (3)

5. "I feel that it is very hard to write in Spanish. It is hard for me because I have to translate from English into Spanish what I want to explain, and, sometimes there is no translation, so I have to write about only a few subjects" (18)

6. "I still have problems expressing the ideas I would like to correctly. I need a larger vocabulary" (7)

7. "I don't know as much vocabulary as I want to. I have to keep looking up because I am not sure if I use the right words" (1)

Students confirmed the difficulty mentioned above to match their capacity of expression in a foreign language with their actual knowledge of the world. As we can see, the main problem seems to be the ability to relate ideas in the Spanish they know, or in other words: the match between ideas and expression. Some worded their problems as problems with vocabulary and how to say things in Spanish, some just assumed that creativity is normally limited by dealing with a new code. About fifty per cent of the answers, i.e. numbers 2, 5, and 7, revealed the use of a pattern which appears rather frequently at the beginning and intermediate levels: when faced with writing activities, students at these levels immediately revert to a word-for-word translation strategy by which they try to match L1 and L2 cognitive code systems of conceptualization. As a result of this strategy, students become painfully aware of their limitations in the new code, and thus, overwhelmed with frustration towards writing, due to their lack of knowledge not only of the lexicon, but also of the structures of the new code.

It is well accepted that writing assignments become less structured, less teacher directed, and more creative in nature as students' competence increases. Therefore, it follows that if we can help students by providing them with a clear frame of discourse structure, they should be able to avoid the word-for-word technique and focus on expressing their own meaning and their knowledge of the world. Furthermore, while it can still be used to support what has been learnt in class, writing does not necessarily have to be a burden, nor an exercise done in isolation. On the contrary, it can be directed in an interdependent

fashion, together with listening and speaking. Creative writing within the communicative approach will help us stress creativity, encourage interaction among the students and the teacher, and reduce emphasis on form. If we want to prevent students' practice of relying on their native code for the first stages of composing, and avoid writing as a form of translation, we should approach it from the target language's cognitive code.

If we compare the ACTFL guidelines for writing at the intermediate level with those of the advanced and superior levels, we will notice that creative writing is not considered at the former stage. Indeed, the first thought that comes to mind is how are they going to write creatively if they have problems writing systematically? Yet, as we are trying to prove, this might be a wrong assumption on our part. First, we should clearly decide if writing in our second year curriculum is going to be kept as an isolated activity or if we want to make it an interactive learning tool. Second, we have to find ways to match students' cognitive levels of the world with their cognitive levels of the foreign language code.

To that purpose, we designed an activity that integrates practice in listening and speaking with the final purpose in mind of helping students express their world in writing: a guided composition based on interaction, in which the four language skills are not artificially separated. The goal of this integrative approach, which combines the use of the other language skills in contextualized, authentic communication, not only is to ease their problems with writing in a foreign language, but also to increase their competence in that language. Students start with listening and speaking, in interaction with the instructor, who becomes a guiding tool, as well as among themselves, and the input

provided in the target language at this first stage, is used for the initial stages of composing, then for writing, and finally, for reading.

We started by telling students that the whole class was going to write a short story together. This first step accomplished one of our goals since there is usually a very low level of anxiety when they engage in group work, and also raised students' curiosity to see how a story could be written by a whole class. The first step of the activity consisted of a precommunicative exercise. After explaining to them that a short story should have narration, description, and dialogue, we set the grammatical parameters for this type of discourse by reviewing the structures likely to be used for this purpose. It included a review of the uses of the preterite for narration, imperfect for description, ser for conditions of being, estar to express changes of state, tener plus noun to express reactions, and a mention to the necessary agreement between nouns and their adjacents in Spanish. The review did not, and should not, take longer that five, seven minutes, and we should avoid too much emphasis on the grammatical aspects since they will be naturally reinforced by the instructor through the elicitation, and error correction techniques used in this exercise.

It is also important to realize that visual aids are excellent means to promote discussion and to focus students' attention on specific details. Drawings, flash cards, transparencies, etc., can be used as prompts to create the story. Nevertheless, since it is the students' task to develop a plot, we should avoid visual aids that provide too many stages. One single image, or a set of two, with one set up for the beginning and another set up for the end, provides enough input to work with, while helps to enhance creativity. We chose the

latter possibility, and showed the students an image to start the story and a second one to guide them towards a possible, still open, end.

The success of this writing activity is based on the careful use of elicitation techniques in the composing stage, and therefore we should keep in mind several factors while we elicit responses from the students. Instructors have to be aware that they only intervene as facilitators, as guiding tools, and they should avoid providing too much input or interfering excessively with students' choices for the plot, both grammatically and in terms of content. The instructor's function is to facilitate the flow of ideas by asking questions adequate to the purpose, and to help with the organization of these ideas once they have been expressed by the students themselves. The avoidance of too much interference can be easily achieved by preparing a list of questions relevant to the topic, in which special precautions have been undertaken to make sure that the type of questions selected fulfills two main requirements: the grammatical form corresponds to the structures reviewed, and they are questions that require specific information. The use of yes/no questions should be minimized as much as possible.

In the third and fourth semesters of a foreign language curriculum, students ought to be able to describe people and situations, to talk about feelings and reactions, about likes and dislikes; and they should be able to do so both in the present and in the past. According to this level of competence in the foreign language, they should be prepared to answer from simple questions such as: what place is this?; where is the place?; who is this person?; what is his/her name?; what is he/she doing there?, which require very basic structures and verbal tenses, to more complex ones such as: why did he/she think of coming to this place?; what was in his/her mind when he/she made that decision?, where

the emphasis has shifted from repeating simple structures to providing information that requires a more complex process of conceptualization.

While students are fabricating the plot of the story, instructors' task is to reinforce both the use of the appropriate structures and the organization of the content. For the latter, some notes written on the board should suffice, for the former, since this is a communicative exercise, we ought to select a technique that does not break down communication. We opted for indirect error correction, and the reinforcement of the adequate grammatical structures was done by repeating the answers with the right format. Once this step was over and we had gathered enough information, we then asked students to work in groups of four people and to start organizing all the data in paragraph form. They were not allowed to use dictionaries, instead they were told to ask questions, in the target language, to their classmates, both inside and outside the group, or to the instructor, who would not translate into English, but paraphrase the word or phrase in Spanish. To summarize, the only language allowed was Spanish.

We used a whole class period of fifty minutes for the brainstorming and the first stage of composition. After that, students were required to finish the work as homework, and they were encouraged to make as many changes to the plot as they wished, and to contact classmates to do the work if they needed to, or felt like it. The result of the complete activity were compositions that had great more substance and content to them, a reduction of seventy per cent of errors common at this level of competence, and, even more important, a very positive reaction among students towards writing in the foreign language as it can be seen in the comments they wrote in their evaluation of this writing technique. Their comments were the following:

1. "This method of creative writing would certainly help me write in Spanish because we don't really think this way whenever we write in English. Writing in Spanish is generally more difficult because we feel limited in our vocabulary and our ideas. But this method seems to break down these barriers for me" (18)

2. "The short story writing lecture was definitely a great way to make the learning of different aspects of Spanish fun. I enjoyed making up such a detailed story and an ending just from two pictures. It wasn't until the lecture that I realized that an entire short story could be written with the level of Spanish that we know. I have to say that it was a beneficial exercise and I learned a lot and realized how far the Spanish that I know could stretch" (3)

3. "I really liked writing a short story as a group in Spanish. I think that by writing in a group we can expand our vocabulary and increase our communication skills. It's also an enjoyable way to learn Spanish" (1)

4. "I think the technique in class was very useful for a class with the same level of Spanish. One of the biggest problems I have in Spanish is vocabulary and this technique allows you to put vocab word with a picture to reinforce the learning process" (7)

5. "I really enjoyed the creative writing activity. It was a lot of fun and I think we should do it more often. It let me practice my Spanish speaking and writing skills. The sentence structures you listed on the board were good for review and helped us to focus on expression. This activity also helped in getting the entire class involved. Overall this was a very good experience for everyone" (9)

6. "The learning technique presented Friday was effective and would be a good way to teach a class. The technique aids in the retention of vocabulary and speaking in general because a lot of dialogue takes place. The technique allows for a lot of creativity which helps students to expand vocabulary and take more risks in terms of trying new words and sentences. The visual aids prompt creativity. The technique gives the student more control over what they learn and how they learn. This is good because the student will remember more" (20)

The creative writing exercise that we participated in during our last Spanish class was very beneficial. Not only did we learn new vocabulary as we brainstormed the events of the story but the teacher also had us focus on a certain verb tense. I have problems remembering how to apply the numerous verb tenses, I can memorize one and use it correctly, but remembering them all is

> more challenging. I believe this project was a great way to stimulate our imaginative minds as well as to strengthen our Spanish-writing skills. Overall, I think this project is very effective and applies many of the skills needed in educating students in a foreign language. (8)

As we can see from these comments, and as we saw in the final drafts of the directed creative writing exercise, the integration of the four language skills together with the use of adequate elicitation techniques and a communicative approach to writing, has proven to be a more than adequate bridge between the students' cognitive level of knowledge of the world and their cognitive level of the foreign language code. The excellent results towards fulfillment of curricular expectations were only superseded by the students' enthusiasm at discovering their real communicative abilities in the foreign language, and the "break down", as one of them worded it, of the barriers between concepts and expression which made writing in the new code a fearful and frustrating experience at the intermediate level.

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